

# Project Deliverables Release Decision Process

Guidelines for typical processes that can be used near the end of a project to systematically review open issues and determine which ones must be corrected before the project deliverable(s) can be released and the project considered complete.

Way too many project deliverables get released before they're truly ready. The customer needs it now! We have to release it now to make our revenue goals, or to save money in IT, or to release the building to its owner, or to begin that new promotional campaign.

But if a project's main deliverables are released before they are truly ready, everyone will pay. The customer will have to live with a buggy product or system. The building may not be ready in every detail for occupancy. All groups may not be ready and willing to use the new business process. The team may not be truly ready to support the new marketing campaign. Whatever type of project you are on and whatever its deliverable, the team has the responsibility to make sure that it is truly ready for release to its ultimate customers.

This release decision process helps ensure that teams make a thorough evaluation and responsible release of the project's deliverables based on a thorough understanding of the their true state and readiness for release.

Using such a process also establishes a rhythm in the endgame process. It helps make the release date somewhat predictable by monitoring the rate of new issues still being found, the severity of those issues, and the rate at which they are being resolved. Such tracking can help the group see if they are truly converging on a final releasable deliverable, or if the number of issues is remaining constant or increasing. In short, the process helps demonstrate that you have management control over the endgame. This will keep upper management managing at their level instead of yours, and will reduce the risk of upper management stepping in and unilaterally making a premature release decision.

Start this process when your project's main deliverables are reaching the stage that you are considering pre-release testing or evaluation at the system, product, or user level, as appropriate to your project's objectives.

The types and applications of release processes included are:

- Final project releases for technical deliverables, such as IT systems or applications,
- Final releases for non-technical deliverables, e.g. written items such as literature for marketing promotional campaigns, and physical deliverables such as design/build packages to feed a new construction project.

# Release Decision Process Guidelines

## Release Decision-Making

This guideline provides examples of typical processes used by the team to systematically make end-of-project release decisions as the project deliverable is nearing completion.

### What a Release Decision Is

A release decision is a consensus decision that the functional and attribute characteristics of the project's deliverable(s) match the requirements set forth earlier in the project, to the degree necessary and sufficient to provide both an adequate fitness for use by the customer (i.e. quality) and an adequate return on investment for the company. The release decision has a greater impact than other gating checkpoint decisions because the cost of finding and fixing product problems increases by orders of magnitude once the product has been released to customers. The need for consensus among cross-functional groups (e.g. engineering, manufacturing, service, and marketing for a product development project) that the project deliverable has an adequate "fitness for use" is critical. And in order to generate an effective consensus decision, as the release event approaches, a clear and detailed characterization of the current state of the project deliverable must be available to all of these groups.

### How a Project Process Pays Off

Endgame pressures to finish the project and release its deliverables can become overwhelming and sweep aside concerns about quality, fitness for use, and in some cases even safety. The prematurely released product or other type of deliverable may generate some immediate relief for the company. But, in the long run, it may have quality problems that have to be fixed under the noses of customers or users. This can generate returns, lost sales, and even damage to the organization's name and reputation. It is tempting to conclude that such premature release decisions are bad decisions, made by shortsighted managers who ignored the concerns about quality and safety and chose to make their numbers at the expense of long term issues.

**But in all too many of these endgame situations, executive management is given no hard data from the team with which to judge the current state of the project's deliverable.** Left with this void of data, management—good and bad—will try to fill in the blanks in the business equation as best they can and make the decisions they have to make. Faced with a development organization that has become opaque, and with cross-functional organizations such as marketing, manufacturing, and finance providing forecasts, opportunity data, burn rates, development cost to date, etc., it is not surprising that release decisions may be become biased toward release.

It is at this point that the use of an effective process throughout the project lifecycle pays big dividends.

- If the scope and requirements have been captured and maintained, then the company is synchronized to a sufficient level of detail on what the requirements are for this project's deliverable(s). If an effective validation strategy of reviews (and testing as applicable for the type of project) has been employed along the way, to ensure that what the project team is creating matches the scope and requirements, then any differences between the requirements and the deliverable have been observed and recorded at some point in the process.
- If an effective issue management system has been employed, then the set of differences between the requirements and the nearly completed deliverable can be identified at any time. It is this set of unresolved issues that becomes the focus of attention during the release decision process.

In order to avoid pre-mature releases, the following section provides an example of a typical release decision process that uses the data available from requirements and issue management, along with release-related review meetings, to reach a decision about readiness for release. The example process can be adapted to different types of project deliverables; the differences usually revolve around who is involved from your cross-functional team and what information is needed to make the release decision.

Following that process, an example is provided of reviews and checklists that are typically employed as release time nears. These tools ensure the team has collected the specific data for their situation that will give everyone the information they need to make a sound release decision.

# Step by Step Release Decision Processes

This section provides two examples of a release process, for very different types of project deliverables, to illustrate how the same basic sequence applies to different projects.

## Example – Release Decision Process for Technical Project Deliverable

Starting point: Before final system-level testing for a product, system, or application begins.

1. **Hold open issues review meeting:** Before the start of final system testing (where the design is tested point by point against its requirements), the core cross-functional project team meets to discuss the current open issues. (An issue management system should be able to quickly produce such a report. Each issue should clearly call out how the design is deviating from the requirements.)
2. **Resolve major issues:** If there are any show stoppers—issues with the deliverable’s attributes, functionality, etc.—that must be resolved before validation testing begins, they are resolved before testing commences. Completion criteria for transitioning from development to validation testing can be used to provide specific parameters for judging readiness for validation.
3. **Run full pass of system testing:** A complete pass is made through the system validation testing.
4. **Hold short morning Issues Meetings:** Each morning, any issues discovered during the previous day’s testing are sifted—rated according to severity and priority—and discussed in a short meeting among a limited group who has a say in the deliverable’s readiness for release. For example, the group may include the project manager, technical lead, quality assurance or testing manager, and the marketing product manager.
5. **Decide dispensation of each new issue:** During the meeting, for each issue, a decision is made to do one of the following (for example):
  - fix while testing
  - halt testing until fixed, then restart testing
  - alter requirements
  - alter test protocols
  - fix in documentation only
  - no fix necessary

- defer to a future upgrade release

If a decision has broad implications, more people may be involved. But the daily meetings should be kept small enough to move fast, while just large enough to keep the risk of a bad decision low.

6. **Review remaining issues when testing cycle is complete:** At the end of the validation cycle, the limited group reviews the remaining open issues and decides whether they have a viable release candidate. The group should reference completion criteria set ahead of time for release readiness.
7. **Run new validation cycle until required tests have passed and required issues are resolved:** If they decide they do not have a viable candidate, then when whatever necessary additional issues correction is done, another validation (regression or full) testing cycle is begun and steps 3 through 6 of this process are executed again.
8. **Hold meeting to consider release decision:** If the group feels they now have a viable release candidate, then another full core cross-functional team meeting is held, the results of the validation testing are discussed, the remaining open issues presented, and the overall status of the deliverable is compared to any completion or release criteria.
9. **Resolve final issues:** If the group cannot agree that the remaining issues allow a release, then the group must agree upon final issue resolution actions to be taken. If they cannot, the Project Sponsor may need to be involved for a decision.
10. **Agree upon release:** If closure on these issues can be agreed upon with no further changes to the deliverable that may affect validation, then the project's technical deliverable (e.g. product, system, or application) is released.

## Example – Release Decision Process for Marketing Communications Literature Release

Starting point: Approaching the time for final masters of new marketing materials to be released and sent to the printer.

1. **Hold review meeting for the deliverable, including open issues:** Before distributing draft copies to anyone in the organization who needs to be part of the final review, hold a meeting to review the state of the materials and any known open issues or questions.
2. **Resolve major issues:** If there are any show stoppers—issues that must be dealt with before the items are ready to be sent for wider review—they are resolved before creating review packages.
3. **Distribute review materials:** A final review package is sent to everyone who is being allowed final comment on the marketing materials—copy, graphics, etc.

The package is accompanied by instructions for how to submit feedback, and when all feedback must be received in order to be considered complete.

4. **Hold short morning Issues Meetings:** At some frequency, depending upon how long the review cycle is, a short meeting is held by a limited group who has a say in the deliverable's readiness for release. They review any issues that have been received from reviewers since the last issues meeting. All items received are rated according to severity and priority.
5. **Decide dispensation of each new issue:** During the meeting, for each issue, a decision is made to do one of the following (for example):
  - fix while others are still reviewing the materials
  - halt all reviews and tell reviewers to wait until a new package has been sent to them (when a very serious issue has been found)
  - alter requirements for the materials so that the issue discovered is no longer a 'violation'
  - alter review instructions
  - decide that no fix necessary
  - defer to a future revision of the documents

If a decision has broad implications, more people may be involved in these decisions. But the frequent issues review meetings should be kept small enough to move fast, while just large enough to keep the risk of a bad decision low.

6. **Review remaining issues when all reviewer's comments have been received:** At the end of the review period, the limited group reviews the remaining open issues and decides whether they have a viable release candidate to send to the printer, or conversely, whether such major issues have been surfaced that a revision and another review cycle will be required. The group should reference completion criteria set ahead of time for release readiness.
7. **Run new review cycle until required issues are resolved:** If they decide they do not have a viable candidate, then when whatever necessary issues correction is done, another review package is created and another review cycle begun, and steps 3 through 6 of this process are executed again.
8. **Hold consensus meeting to consider release decision:** If the limited group feels they now have a viable release candidate, then another full cross-functional core team meeting is held, the results of the all the review feedback are discussed and the remaining open issues presented and compared to the release criteria for the deliverable.

9. **Resolve final issues:** If the group cannot agree that the remaining issues are such that a release can still be allowed, then the group must agree upon final issue resolution actions to be taken. If they cannot, the Project Sponsor may need to be involved for a decision.
10. **Agree upon release:** If closure on these issues can be agreed upon with no further changes to the package, then the materials can be approved for creating the final master package for the printer, and released for production.

## Tools for Release Decision-Making

As noted above, release decision-making does not happen in an ad hoc fashion. A systematic process for reviewing readiness and issues is needed. Tools for conducting those reviews and making the decisions can help ensure the team truly is taking into account all the necessary factors.

Such tools can include Review and Release Checklists.

- Review and Release Checklists. The remainder of this document provides several examples. See also our template [End of Approval Phase Checklist](#).
- User or customer acceptance checklists. See our [Customer Acceptance Checklist](#) and our [User Acceptance Test Plan](#) templates.
- Release and completion criteria set earlier in the project to document what constitutes “done” for a project deliverable. See our [Completion Criteria Guideline](#) for information on the kinds of completion/release criteria that can be set, and our [Software Release Criteria](#) document template for an example of doing so, and documenting them, for a software development project.

The rest of this section provides examples of typical specific checklists used by teams nearing release of certain kinds of project deliverables. Read this section to get an idea of what aspects can be considered by a team nearing release, in order to create such a checklist for your projects.

### Example: Review Checklist Items – Completion Criteria for Releasing New Marketing Literature

The following items are examples from a marketing group’s release checklist to allow a new marketing literature package to production printing.

#### CHECKLIST ITEMS – Marketing Literature Package Release to Printer

1. Have we verified that all features discussed in the Marketing literature match what the company is delivering and selling? (Reviewers have confirmed that we are synchronized with any final changes to the product/service this marketing literature is promoting.)
2. Has Legal verified that all permissions needed for any case study data, client mentions, etc. have been obtained?
3. Have all permissions for included images been obtained?
4. Have we determined and received approval for initial production count and associated budget?
5. Has printer committed to our production and delivery schedule?



6. Have we determined whether printer will ship directly to other locations?
7. Do we have final confirmed instructions from the printer as to what we have to submit, and are appropriate people ready to produce?
8. Have we included final review by typical customers for any last issues?
9. Did any reviewers return major concerns about the copy, format, etc. that they feel should hold up a release, and have we resolved those issues satisfactorily?
10. Have we produced softcopy versions to put online for download? Are all conversion issues resolved?

### **Example: Pilot Run Results Review Checklist for Release Decision Meeting**

This example checklist is used on projects creating a new product including hardware that must be built by the companies manufacturing group for shipment to customers. A typical pre-release activity is to make a pilot run of hardware, the primary purpose of which is to prove out the processes and test capabilities that Manufacturing will later use to produce that product in volume. Some companies also test their order processes, by having Manufacturing get orders through the system as they would for normal orders later. The pilot run typically also creates units to be used for First Customer Ship (FCS), sometimes with the intent of making enough product available to ship to customers who are eagerly awaiting larger quantities, making the pilot run an even more critical part of release decision-making.

In the case of internal software applications, a pilot run might consist of release-level builds of the software and trial deployment to test duplication/distribution capabilities. The idea is to try out all your cross-functional release-level processes to test everyone's readiness to go.

The purpose then of a Pilot Run Review is to examine the results of the pilot run and identify any problems that must be resolved with the product, its documentation, or the associated processes, before the product can be released. Review items such as those in the checklist below, as applicable for your project. The team members responsible for each item to be reviewed must provide detailed information the review attendees can use to determine readiness for release.

#### ***CHECKLIST ITEMS – Pilot Run Results Review***

1. Review results of building the product at higher volume:
  - Have new issues been uncovered?
  - Were yields as expected?
2. Review results of using near-final assembly and test processes. Are any

process or documentation changes needed?

3. Review operator or support personnel performance. Did we train them and did the training work?
4. Review use of draft user/support publications. Are any changes needed?
5. Discuss results of using outside vendors slated to support production. Are their deliverables within specification? Did our interface and communication processes with that vendor work?
6. Examine revised cost estimates. Do we still meet product cost from the vision?
7. Review results of any pilot deployments. Did delivery and installation go smoothly?

#### **DECISIONS AND FOLLOW-UP:**

8. Update Action Item List and Key Decisions List, and publish meeting minutes summarizing results of the above checklist items.
9. Determine readiness for First Customer Shipment; or if that has already occurred with pilot units, determine any actions required before further shipments to customers.
10. Revise the remaining schedule for reaching readiness for release to Production/Delivery, if necessary, and meet that schedule.
11. Approve changes to the documentation as needed to be ready for release to Production/Delivery and make those changes.

This example provided by Global Brain Inc. from Projects at Warp Speed with QRPD: The Definitive Guide to Quality Rapid Product Development, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition.

### **Example: Excerpt from a Construction Design Review and Release Checklist**

The following is an excerpt of a longer checklist for an A&E team that is preparing to release facility designs for start of a construction contract bid.

*Note that this checklist excerpt refers to multiple items that need to be “complete, reviewed, and approved.” They are individual project deliverables that together determine completion of the A/E project and readiness to feed the construction follow-on. The overall release decision for that transition is made by a group reviewing the total state of the project’s multiple critical deliverables. Before this point, each deliverable should have been through its own reviews, updates, and functional sign-offs, with their own detailed checklists as needed to ensure that they each met their own completion-and-release goals.*

### **CHECKLIST ITEMS – Construction Readiness Review**

1. Are specifications and drawings in release status?
2. Have all criteria in the Design Criteria document been met and approved as such?
3. Have all reference documents been compiled, reviewed, and approved?
4. Are quality assurance and quality control requirements for the construction effort identified?
5. Are cost estimates developed, reviewed, and approved?
6. Are the procurement strategy and schedule finalized?
7. Is a list of submittals developed?
8. Are “hold and witness points” identified?
9. Are instructions to bidders submitted?
10. Is a pricing schedule established?
11. Is the Statement of Work for the bid package developed, reviewed, and approved?
12. Is final resolution of all open issues completed?
13. Is a strategy for handling unresolved issues addressed prior to start of construction?

## Administrative Information

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